For the third phase of its rural campus, Epic Systems Corporation took inspiration from the surrounding farms

DESIGN
HARVEST

BY LINDA MACK

In 1996, a scant 10 percent of American hospitals had converted to electronic records. That was the year Minneapolis architect John Cuningham, FAIA, met Judith Faulkner, CEO and founder of electronic medical records company Epic Systems Corporation. Faulkner needed space remodeled for her fast-growing company in Madison, Wisconsin. She was tripling the number of employees, from 100 to 300.

Today, Epic's corporate campus of two million square feet occupied by 6,000 employees tops the glaciated hills in Verona, west of Madison. Master planned and largely designed by Cuningham Group Architecture, it includes a 5,400-seat Learning Center for client training and the company's annual users' group meeting, an 11,500-seat auditorium that is entirely underground, 13 office buildings, a 600-seat cafeteria, and, yes, a tree house.

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>
> *John Cuningham, FAIA*

For Epic's newest buildings, Cuningham Group borrowed forms and materials from the surrounding Wisconsin countryside. A lattice-like bridge (above) stretches over the rolling landscape to connect the Barn (top) and the Shed (above).

In summer 2013, the third phase, dubbed the Farm Campus, opened. Its three office buildings borrow the shapes and materials of surrounding vernacular buildings—a barn, a shed, and a stable. The Barn features a gambrel roof, red barn siding, and a foundation of fieldstone reclaimed from nearby barns. The Stable is topped by a traditional cupola and sheathed in rich green and white board-and-batten siding. More contemporary, the Shed has large doors, board-formed concrete, and sections that look like they were added over time. A classic green tractor sits outside its main doors.

Faulkner "wanted to evoke this feeling of rural Wisconsin," says Cuningham Group project manager Dan Grothe, AIA. "We made some literal moves, but we were also trying to be not so literal—to be playful."

While John Cuningham's mentor Ralph Rapson might be turning in his form-follows-function grave, Cuningham says there is a purpose to the admittedly retro design: "What they do here—designing medical software—is very serious business. But it's important that the environment feels playful and creative. It's part of their marketing."

SETTING THE STANDARD

The whole headquarters, including the glassy Learning Center, the recently completed underground auditorium called Deep Space, and the tree house—a place to hang out and get inspired—is designed with that goal in mind. Tied together over the 900 acres by clear circulation paths, the campus architecture speaks to the 800 to 1,000 people who come every week for training, the future clients who come to see where the software is created, and the future employees who come to see what it would be like to work here.

LEARNING CENTER

PHASE 1: *The original campus, completed in 2006, was designed to resonate with Prairie School architecture. Architect John Cuningham calls its Tree House a "low-tech environment in a high-tech world." In this standalone brainstorming space, beeping and buzzing cell phones are not allowed.*

The curvy Learning Center, considered its own section of campus, opened shortly after the original campus was completed.

PHASE 2: *A regionally flavored material palette of wood, bluestone, brick, and copper unifies the second-phase buildings, completed in 2010. All employee parking is underground, to help the campus retain its pastoral character.*

PHASE 3: *While establishing new imagery, the Farm Campus follows the program and layout Cuningham Group established in the first two phases—long, narrow buildings that harvest plenty of daylight and keep the employees connected to the outdoors.*

BARN

SHED

STABLE

*The "feature stair"
in the Barn is called
the Hayloft. Like the
building themes, the
feature stairs create
a strong identity for
each building and its
employees.*

*Right: A deconstructed International Harvester tractor decorates the Shed's feature stair.
Below: Part of the Barn morphs into a farmhouse with a wrap-around porch— a perfect spot for hanging out or brainstorming.*

*Above: A neon cow marks the entry to the black-and-white-tiled corridor dubbed the Creamery.
Below: A colorful rotunda tops the Stable's feature stair.*

"Even though it's a very large campus, the design isn't repetitive, so you're not a cipher working in building 1203. People love that."

John Cuningham

"They are competing with Google and Microsoft for employees," says Cuningham. "They use the architecture to reinforce that."

Cuningham Group's design for the original campus, executed with architecture firm ZGF out of Seattle, drew on southern Wisconsin's Prairie School tradition. The long, narrow brick and limestone office buildings feature hipped roofs and wide overhangs. It opened in 2006 with 1,500 employees and now houses 2,500. Since then, Cuningham Group has designed the glassy 700,000-square-foot Learning Center, which traces the site's contours; the cafeteria; and the entire second phase of the campus, which houses 2,200 employees in regionally inspired buildings of wood, bluestone, brick, and copper. It was completed in 2010.

The campus layout is as important as the architecture to the Epic Systems culture. Buildings are long and narrow to harvest daylight, they are grouped together so employees can easily interact, and outdoor spaces invite people outside to both contemplate and recreate. All 4,100 parking spaces are underground, and the glacial hills also hold more than 2,000 geothermal wells.

ACCELERATION

In September 2011, just after Epic Systems' annual users' group meeting, Faulkner first talked to John Cuningham about the latest expansion. "They were planning the campus in-house, and Judy said she wasn't excited about it," Cuningham recalls. "'What do you want?' I asked. 'I'd like a farm,' she said."

But she needed it fast. In June 2013, 1,000 employees moved into the three new office buildings. "The 21 months it took from concept to completion wouldn't have been possible without our knowing
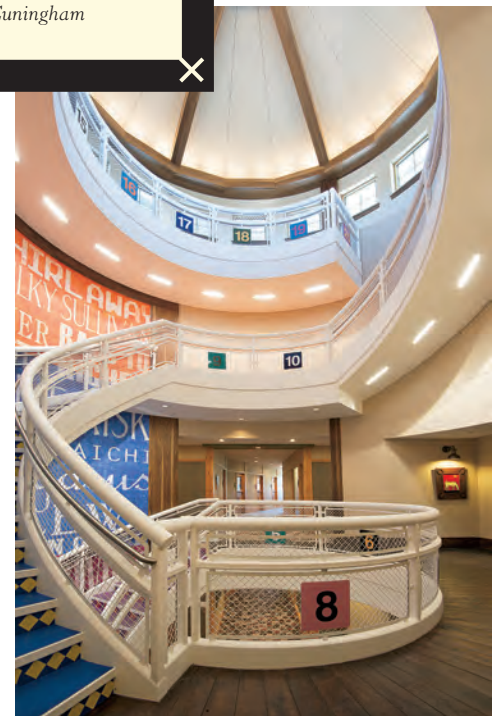
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them as well as we do," says Grothe, who has worked on the Epic Systems project since 2009.

The layout of offices, conference rooms, and break rooms established in the earlier buildings—and based on everything from team size to how long it takes to walk to a conference room—was repeated. So was the use of the "feature stairs," a central staircase that navigates the grade changes and lends an identifiable theme to each building. The stair of the Shed, whose interior was designed by LSC Design Studio of Seattle, features a deconstructed International Harvester tractor mounted on the wall. The Barn's stair recalls a hayloft. The Stable's stair, part of an interiors scheme by H. Krueger & Associates of Madison, is an elaborate, colorful spiral.

While the first two campus phases included quirky touches such as themed conference rooms, a slide instead of a stair, and art fair booty adorning conference rooms and lobbies, the new buildings take the quirkiness to a new level. One end of the Barn morphs into a farmhouse, complete with a gabled roof, shuttered windows, and a wrap-around porch. An exit stair is housed in a silo. A corridor's black-and-white-checkerboard floor recalls that of a creamery.

"Even though it's a very large campus, the design isn't repetitive, so you're not a cipher working in building 1203," says Cuningham. "People love that."

And, by 2015, some Epic Systems employees will be able to say they work in the Wizard's Academy. A fourth campus phase is under way, and the theme is Oxford and Cambridge University Collegiate Gothic. With 1,500 people in five buildings, it will be a bit larger than the Farm Campus.

How big will Epic Systems grow? Faulkner "cheerfully says she has no idea," Cuningham reports. One of the largest medical software companies in the world, Epic Systems has gone international with clients in South Africa, Singapore, Denmark, and Saudi Arabia.

"Judy's almost disappointed that they have to have offices in Europe," says Cuningham. "She's very proud of what they've built here in the Midwest countryside." **AMN**